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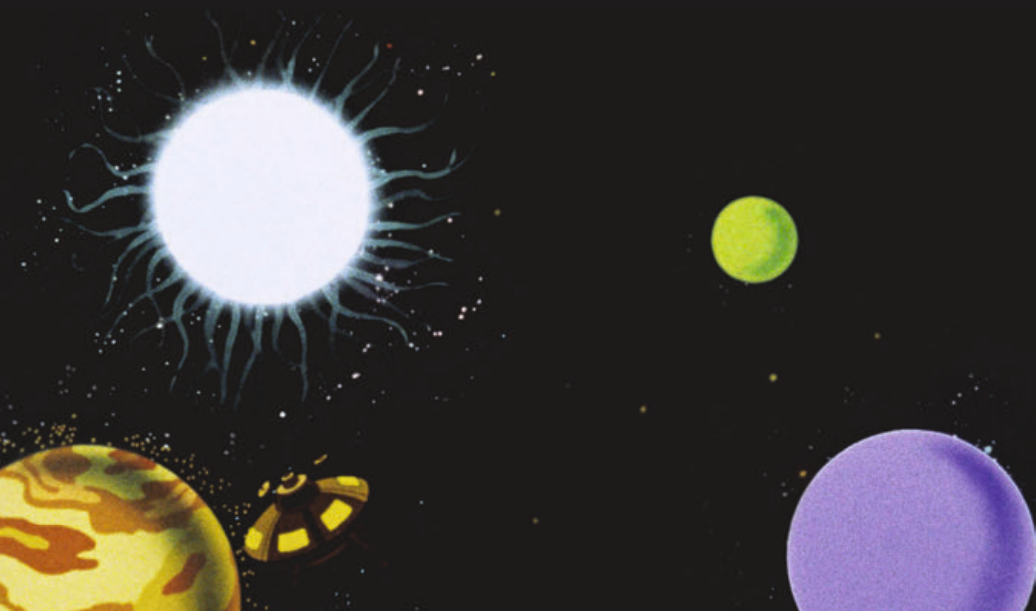
Mystery of the Third Planet by Walter Chaw

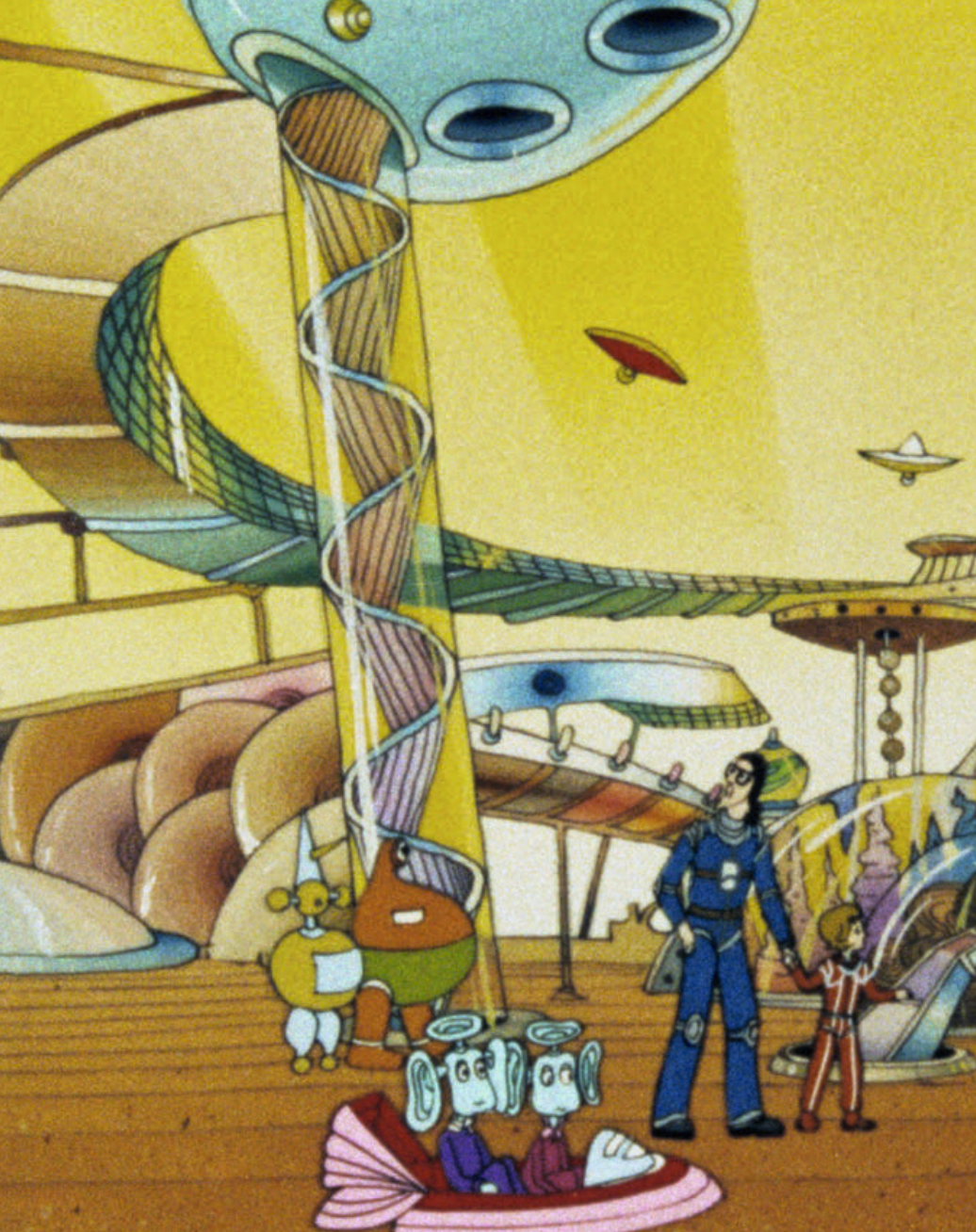
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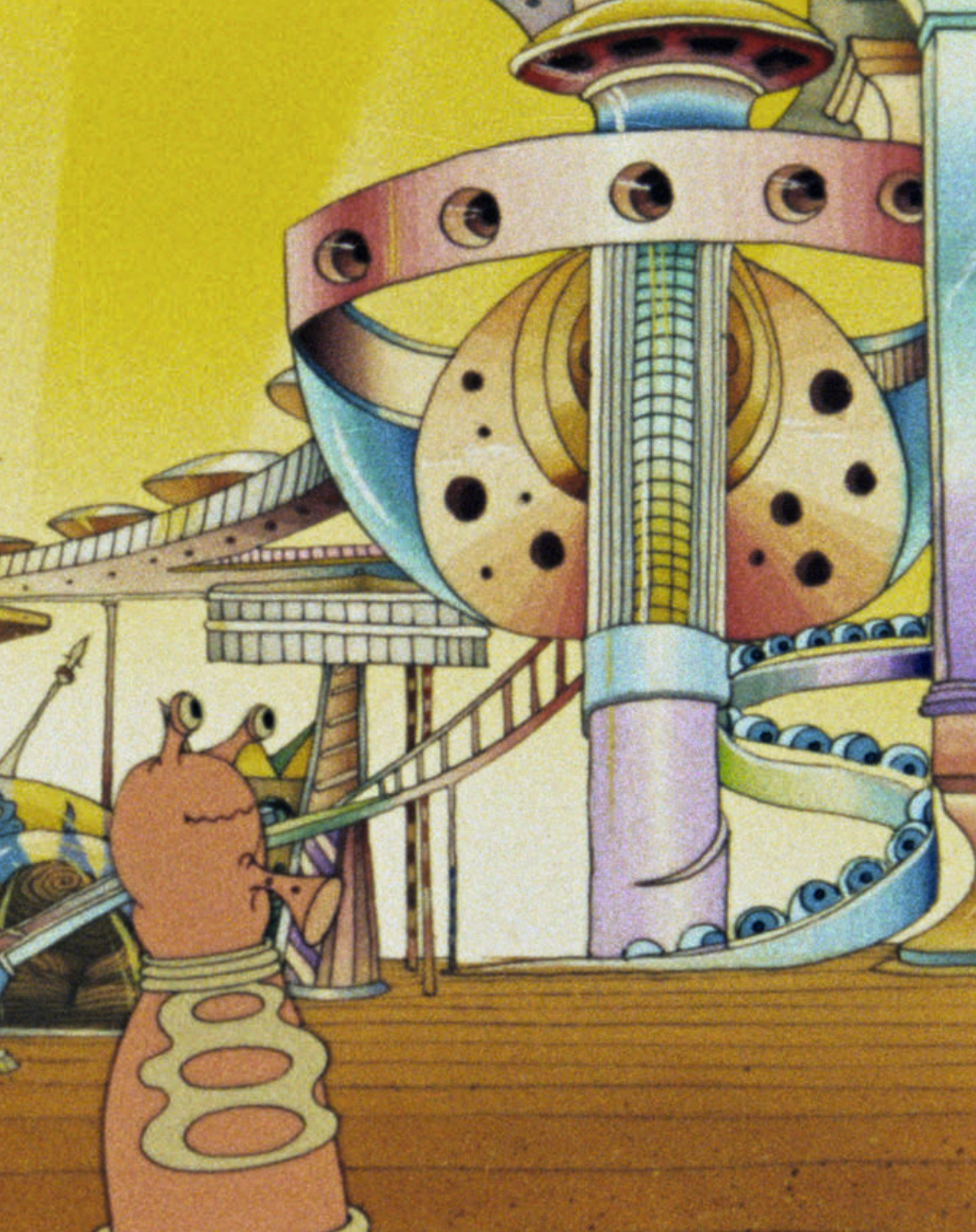
The Remarkable Animation of Vladimir Tarasov
By Jennifer Lynde Barker

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THE MYSTERY OF THE THIRD PLANET

By

Walter Chaw

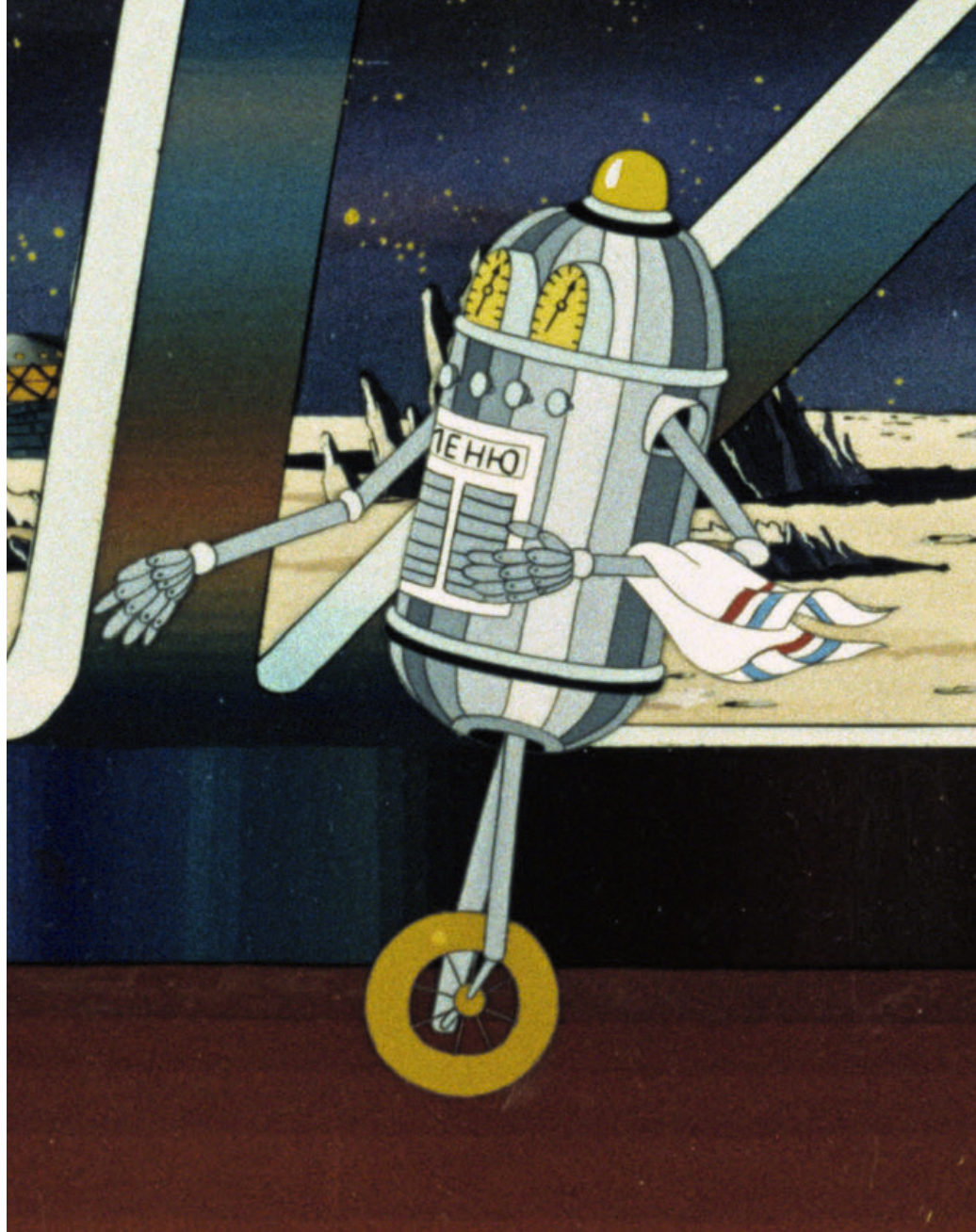
I am on alert when talking birds appear in literature and poetry. I think of the nightingale and Philomela who manifest in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, representatives of speaking truth to unimaginable atrocity - of being silenced and forced to protest, wordlessly, through song. In the Slavic folklore Alexander Nikolaevich Afanasyev collects, there's a story about a nightingale, too, called "The Language of Birds." In it, a child born with the gift of being able to communicate with birds, befriends a nightingale who warns him of storms, pirates, and other maladies. Forced to leave his home by a family who doesn't like what the bird says and so blames the child, he comes eventually upon a kingdom beset by crows and in return for a share of riches and class status, translates the crows' complaint and instructs the king on how to resolve it. There are echoes of the Oedipus story throughout: a hero that's been exiled because of a prophecy; a Cassandra character whose visions are ignored; a kingdom in thrall to a plague only the hero can address; a reunion between abandoned child and parents that resolves a great betrayal. I don't think the stories were influenced by one another so much as I suspect the song of the nightingale is so mournful to human ears that whatever stories we create to explain it will inevitably conjure cautionary tales of betrayal and broken covenants.

The delight of finding echoes of stories in another that could not possibly have intersected its creation is at least emotional confirmation of the theory of a “collective unconscious.” That philosophy we use to explain the existence of archetypes, of an otherwise inexplicable universality in the interpretation of certain signifiers. Carl Jung believed archetype was the language we spoke to ourselves in dreams and what is film, after all, than dreaming? In essence, the collective unconscious draws the world together in an intimate brotherhood that regional bigotries make impossible. We all came from the same place, it says, and we share certain experiences that transcend geography and ideology. Stories from Russia during my lifetime, in particular, were perpetually neglected by me, indoctrinated as I was in Reagan’s description of them as “the Evil Empire” when I was a child, and how any denizens of the same must be technologically/culturally hampered as a consequence. Aside from availability issues only recently seriously addressed by dedicated scholars and archivists (and the bounty of the Internet), I was hamstrung by my own lack of curiosity about a culture I had been raised to believe was soulless and, as a result, artless and austere. Russia made something valuable besides old, sad literature and vodka? Impossible. Even as I eventually came to be educated in the glories of Russia’s film industry through Eisenstein to Kalatozov to Tarkovsky into the modern day, my journey to enlightenment to the glories of Russian popular, and especially children’s, entertainments took longer still. Key to my appreciation? The films of Roman Kachanov and his mentors Lev Atamanov and Vladimir Polkovnikov.

I should confess, though, that I approached all Russian animation as a comparison to the watershed moment of Walt Disney’s 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* which not only directly inspired the creation of China’s first animated feature film, the Wan brothers’ *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) but Russian animators like Ivan Ivanov-Vano, the “Patriarch of Soviet Animation,” whose charming short *Moydodyr* (1939), about the adventures of a filthy kid trying to avoid a sentient washtub, shows a clear debt to Carl Stalling and Ub Iwerks. I mention Stalling in particular, though, for his invention of “Silly Symphonies” and Iwerks for the loose-

jointed, bobbing dance motion I associate first with Mickey Mouse's bouncing on the deck of *Steamboat Willie* (1928). Their work together on *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), the first of the Silly Symphonies, is referenced in the antics of twin robots at the beginning of Roman Kachanov's *The Mystery of the Third Planet* (1981) and thus the Iron Curtain which I had been led to believe was impermeable, shows itself to be just an effective blind for indoctrinating me, gullible and patriotic, into the myth of Western supremacy. When it comes to programming and cloistering a population, to establishing an "other" to justify and consolidate an isolationist center, the Soviets got nothing on us.

I realize the idea that the fact my entry point into Soviet animation was a few stray references to Disney is reductive and patronizing, speaking to my own ignorance and need at some level to relate every experience to the familiar whether the references are central to the organizing principle of the piece or not. Any deeper investigation into Russian animation reveals true pioneers of stop-motion like former principal ballet dancer at the Mariinsky Theatre, Alexander Shiryayev, who reproduced his dance company's routines with puppets as early as 1907. Or the extraordinary work of entomologist Ladislav Aleksandrovitch Starevich who, surrounded by a studio of preserved insect specimens, decided one day to make elaborate stop-motion epics with them like *The Grasshopper and the Ant* (1913) and the castle-siege fairytale *The Beautiful Lukanida* (1910) in which armies of cockroaches, armed with broadswords, storm a roach-guarded fortress. One can't, after all, conclude that Disney is the catalyst for Soviet animation when Russia's first feature-length animated film (traditionally animated on paper rather than printed on celluloid), Mikhail Tsekhanovsky's *The Tale of the Priest and of his Workman Balda* (1933-36) not only predates *Snow White* but featured an original score by Shostakovich and book by poet Alexander Vvedensky. Tragically, most of this film is now lost after its prints were destroyed during the 1941 attack on Leningrad. The great Aleksandr Ptushko completed a feature-length stop-motion/live-action film *The New Gulliver* (1935) that also predates *Snow White*.



Yet Disney can't entirely be excluded from the conversation around modern Soviet animation (nor any animation, in truth) given that in 1933, Viktor Smirnov, the head of an American-based animation distribution company called "Amkino" was sent to study Disney and Fleischer Studios styles which, combined with a screening of Disney's *Three Little Pigs* at the Moscow International Film Festival, created interest in emulating, and developing, the "Disney style" for Soviet productions. But consider Ivan Ivanov-Vano's extraordinary *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (1947), based on a story by Pyotr Pavlovich Yershov that is itself an expansion of the traditional folktale "The Tale of Iván Tsarévich, the Bird of Light, and the Grey Wolf," where the "Disney style" had evolved to such a point that Disney himself earmarked this film for his own animators to study. Incidentally, Lev Atamanov's *The Snow Queen* (1957), was the first full-length Russian animated film that I saw (and production company Soyuzmultfilm's ninth feature-length picture). It's a beautiful chimera of a picture: a film that has the uncanny feeling of rotoscope married to the cel-animation techniques and styles of Disney. It was the first animated film released by Universal in the United States during the hottest part of the Cold War, found its way to the 1959 San Francisco International Film Festival and even received a proper American home video release on VHS and DVD in the 1990s. Its relative ubiquity, however, came with the consequence that because its international distribution was novel, it only pushed the narrative that Russia hadn't really grown something of its own but, like dutiful comrades, artisans and journeymen, were only capable of reasonable facsimiles. At least for me, its success, ironically, blunted curiosity rather than inspired it.

Roman Kachanov was drafted into the Red Army at the tender age of 11, separated from a father and sister who were later murdered during the Holocaust. He became a fighter pilot and tailgunner during WWII, surviving with serious injuries after being shot down in 1940. He studied as a railway engineer at Moscow university and returned to the war as a special forces operative behind enemy lines. I wonder if his training led to covert work sabotaging supply networks? After the war, he went to

Soyuzmultfilm to study animation and worked as an animator on a broad variety of projects. It's tempting to perform some reductive psychoanalysis of Kachanov: robbed essentially of a childhood, orphaned and transformed into a soldier on the same day, did he look for a career in animation as an attempt to redress his forced maturation? And what does it say that Russian animation seems to have, not unlike their American counterparts, seen animation as mainly the province of children's fare?

Kachanov went to Soyuzmultfilm to study animation at the feet of Russia's masters and created a series of pictures that have embedded themselves into the iconography of Russian popular culture in similar ways, using similar approaches, as Rankin & Bass's beloved seasonal classics *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) and *Frosty the Snowman* (1969) has in ours. His stop-motion short *The Mitten* (1967) is the story of a little girl who so desires a puppy her red mitten becomes one until a tragic event causes it to revert to its former state. His quartet of "Cheburashka" (a monkey-like Mowgli-looking creature found in a crate of oranges) short films introduced it, genteel Gena the Crocodile and zippy, mischievous old woman Shapokylak who looks a lot more like the Jimmy Durante narrator of *Frosty the Snowman* than the typical apple-cheeked Russian *babushka* stereotype, into the cultural vernacular. Somewhere along the way, the referents get confusing: it's no longer clear to me which are the signs and what are the signifiers. Surely Cheburashka has some relationship to Margret and H.A. Rey's Curious George character with Gena playing the Man with the Yellow Hat in some capacity, but Kachanov's films predate Alan Shallek's animated television adaptations of Curious George by at least ten years. At some point - not unlike the osmotic seepage between all cultures and mediums - it becomes less about identifying headwaters and more about discussing the oceans individual tributaries have been feeding for generations. It's ultimately not about calling out how all roads lead to The Velvet Underground and the Beatles, for instance, but to say that in the modern context, the forms those obvious inspirations have taken are both wonderfully strange and in the process of generating a new, shared, well of collective images. Our stories, scattered like the bricks of poor, lamented Babel, reconstituted in shapes other than towers.

Kachanov's major foray into science fiction comes in 1981 -- thirty years after working as an animator on his first feature, Valentina & Zinaida Brumberg's *The Night Before Christmas* (1951) -- with the traditionally hand-drawn and animated *The Mystery of the Third Planet*, and it's marvelous. At under an hour, it establishes an entire universe: a galaxy of strange beings as seen largely through the eyes of a young girl, Alice / Alisa, who, on a quest for new animals for Earth's Moscow Zoo with her zoologist dad Professor Seleznyov and moribund, fatalistic Captain Zelyony, go zipping through space to the moon and beyond. I do wonder if "Alice" has any connection to Lewis Carroll's adventurous young heroine - the Disney *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) -- which, during its flower sequence, might itself owe a debt to Ivan Ivanov-Vano's *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (1947). Stopping at a lunar station, the professor and Alice run into Gromozeka, an old friend of the professor's and an archaeologist given to drink and the spinning of yarns. He's also an alien with eight arms (well, six with two legs), a number we generally associate with arachnids which possess, of course, manifold archetypal meanings. Most spider images are tied to patience because of their general mode of hunting - some, though, are references to the mother who nests and, on occasion, suffocates. For me, they conjure images of the Greek Fates who spin, measure, and cut thread to mete out the length of a person's life. There is thought amongst some cultural anthropologists that the fear of spiders has something to do with our origins as an arboreal species: that spiders and snakes are among the few things that could still kill us up there so the innate revulsion some of us feel is a relic of an evolved adaptation. People who didn't heedlessly fondle snakes and spiders apparently had higher rates of successful reproduction.

Gromozeka is kind, but there is menace to his shape. He tells his buddy to visit The Planet of the Two Captains, a place named after two legendary interstellar explorers where their storehouse of knowledge might be tapped for locations of interesting specimens. The Stallings/Iwerks robots make their return here after providing the film's first joke: trying to load a crate onto Zelyony's ship, celebrating, and then repeating when the

same crate keeps falling out of the ship's hold. There's a mindlessness to their work that forms the crux of the joke, but also a commentary if one chooses to read it that way about the Sisyphean nature of manual labor and the perverse requirement of certain regimes that workers trapped in redundant exercises act like they're pretty happy about it. The same type of robot works as a waiter in the lounge on the moon where Gromozeka tells his tale. He orders 400 drops of "Valerian Root Tincture" - an herbal remedy for, among other things, insomnia and anxiety. Gromozeka does seem a little tense. He asks how many "light year winters" it's been since he last saw his friend and of course "light years" are not measurements of time, but the way he phrases it sounds a lot like the opening of William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey:"

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.

The Wordsworth is a reverie about a time that has past and Gromozeka is engaged in the same sad nostalgia. He gets emotional about the passage of time. When the robot returns with his order, including a drink with two extra drops of tincture it denies adding, there's the dual suggestion that this machine has diagnosed its guest as needing to calm down and also that these robots can't fully be trusted. If we compare the robots to the proletariat, suddenly *Mystery of the Third Planet* takes on a sly, class-based satirical cant. Even without that nudge about the unreliability of collectivism populated by metal workers, Gromozeka is fascinating because he is a specific reflection of certain traditional Russian characteristics of introspection, weighted by the immensity of history, and the irresolvable tension between the old and the new. Captain Zelyony is of course the shadow of Gromozeka: the character occupied by brooding while Gromozeka, despite his flights of despair, is to strangers and children (like Alice whom he adores) energetic and friendly. It's his affection for Alice, in fact, that causes Zelyony to mistake his enthusiasm for aggression.

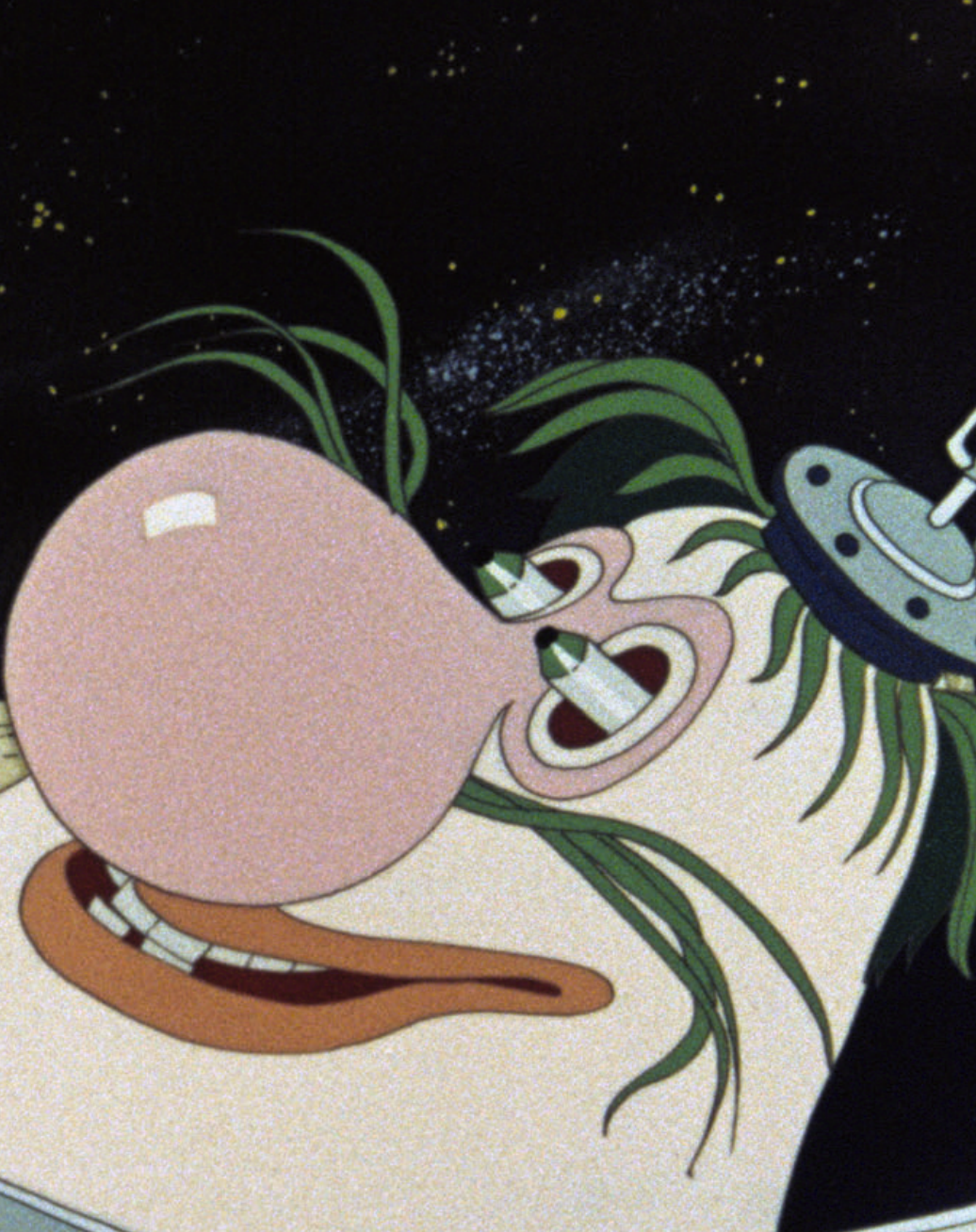
A staple of children's entertainments is this kind of mistaken identity, of course: the terrible monster who turns out to be a friend to the small and vulnerable - and its reverse, the friend who turns out to be a wolf in grandmother's clothing. There's creepy Dr. Verkhovtsev, for instance, the director of the Moscow museum for which our heroes ostensibly work, lurking about and placing roadblocks along the way to their quest. It's soon revealed that the good doctor is the man responsible for the murder and kidnapping of the rare and elusive Chatterbird species across the whole of the planet Bluk. The talking bird who, if our parallel mythologies align here, is responsible for telling sad truths about powerful men. The silencing of such literal whistleblowers feels like a pointed plot point hidden in *The Mystery of the Third Planet*, one made the more poignant for its teller, Kachanov, being a veteran of a devastating war of, for Russia, attrition. This section on Bluk reminds me a great deal of the carnival sequence early in Peter S. Beagle's The Last Unicorn as the Professor and his team examine curiosities like the Tiger-Rat from Penelope and an aquarium full of invisible fish. Even in this relatively joyful interlude, however, there are moments like when the professor declares confidently how the right one of a specimen's two tails is longer than the other (without noticing that the tails have been crossed), where the authority of science, or at least this scientist, is subtly questioned. When a Chatterbird is finally discovered, it has the look of an Aztec god: a Phoenix perhaps, reborn from assumed extinction while the final resolution of the piece has to do with pirates in disguise "unmasked" by Alice's empathy and intuition, by the "unmasking" of a bejeweled surveillance device and finally through the agency of a field of glass flowers that function as cameras, filming in reverse.

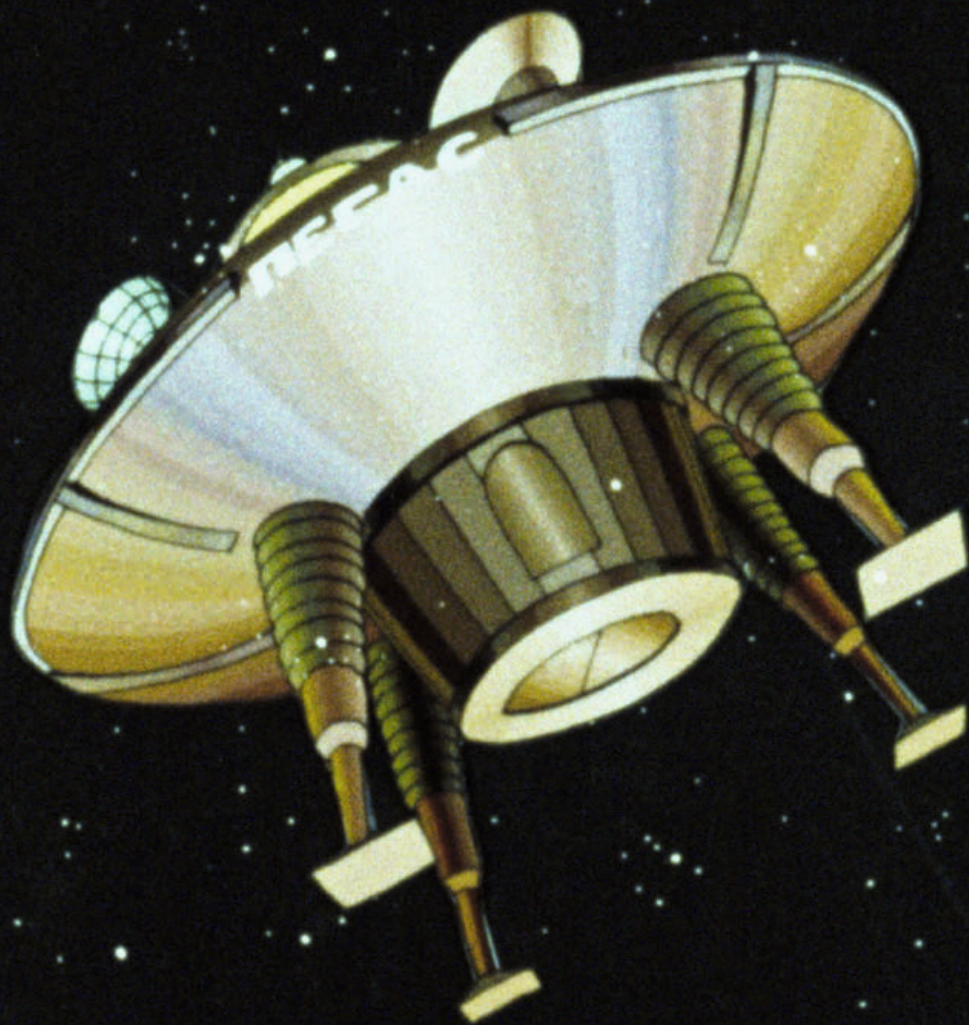
The text of *The Mystery of the Third Planet* is rich for deconstruction along sociopolitical lines; philosophical ones around faith in science vs. intuition; and a mistrust of entrenched authority after a period of violence and unimaginable loss. It suggests that allies are found in unusual places, that a dehumanized workforce is unreliable to the point of treasonous, and that the preservation of cultural traditions is vital to the survival of

any national identity. It provides hope, too, that the future is secure in the idealism of the next generation. The character design is rounded, soft, reminiscent of Hanna-Barbera's syndicated output (that latchkey Gen-X was reared on every afternoon after school) and its structure of a young person taking the mask off a monster to reveal someone holding power of position due to age or social rank ("and I would've gotten away with it if not for you kids!"), is not unlike the masterplot of *Scooby-Doo* episodes. It's a countercultural bliss-out piece, in other words, complete with Boris Filchikov's synth-driven, psychedelic score and its increasingly hallucinogenic images and extended, contemplative, interludes. It's a classic for a reason, a film full of ideas and intricate world-building that, in the gentlest way possible, pokes at the Russian bear in the same way American cartoons throughout the 70s and 80s made hippies the heroes in the face of a looming capitalist dystopia. Every frame is packed: every second of it like the Troll Bridge section of Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, arcane and mysterious and deserving each of its own backstory and franchise. I continue, thirty-six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to dismantle my own blinders to this part of the world. It will be the work of a lifetime.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times*, *Washington Post*, *Criterion*, *The LA Weekly*, *NY Post's Decider*, *NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."





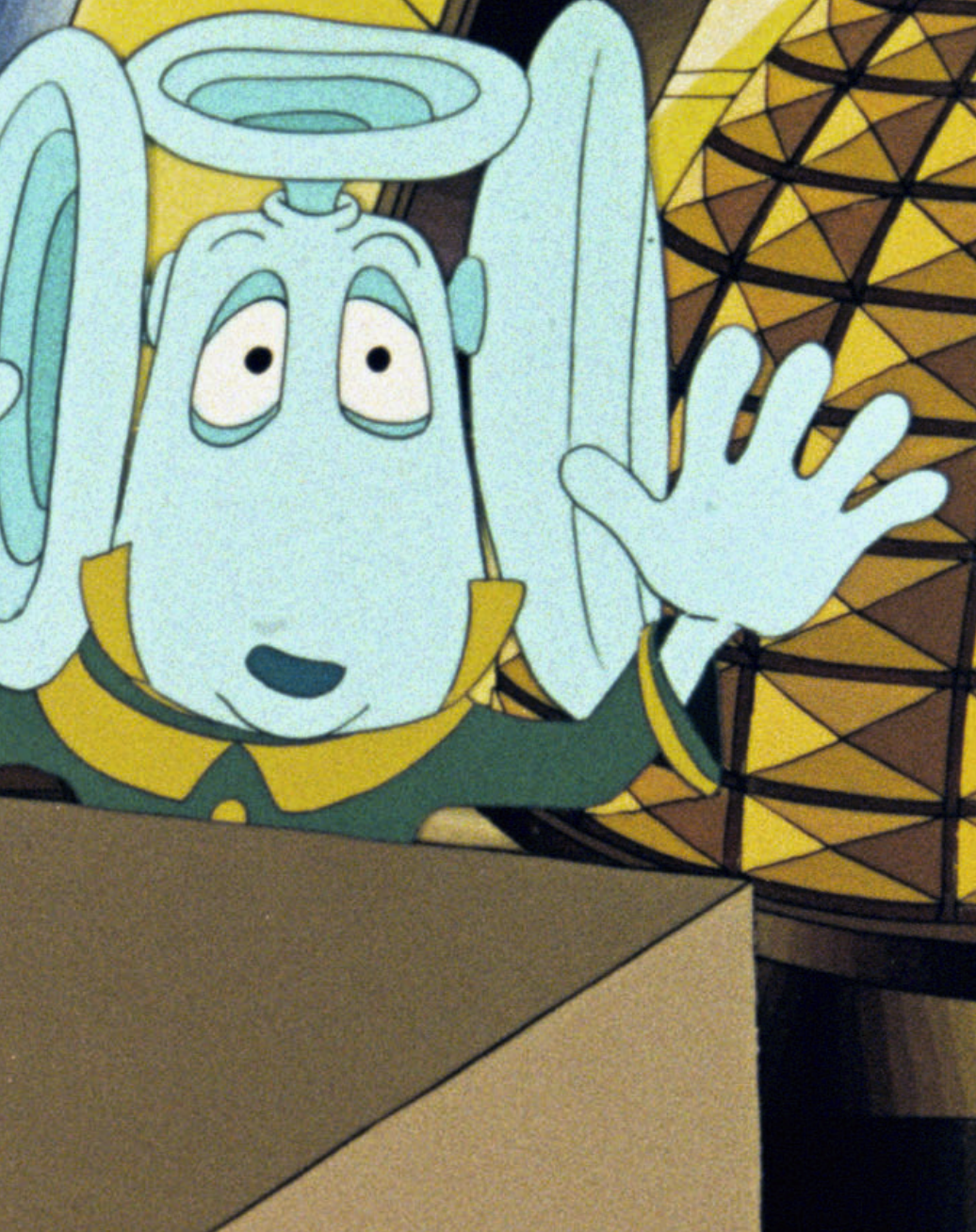












THE REMARKABLE ANIMATION OF VLADIMIR TARASOV

By

Jennifer Lynde Barker

Stories about interplanetary travel, alien species, and cosmic colonialism were very popular for filmmakers during the Cold War. The world had drawn firm borders and utopian vs. dystopian visions of the future were pitted against each other. Of course, science fiction, time travel, space ships and the like had been present since the earliest movies—*A Trip to the Moon* (Georges Méliès, 1902) and *Trip to Mars* (Fleischer Studios, 1924), for example. Filmmakers first adapted stories by the likes of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, then turned to works by Stanisław Lem, Karel Čapek, Arthur C. Clarke, Osamu Tezuka, and others as the 20th century progressed alongside scientific and technological advances. In the Soviet Union, the works of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Alexei Tolstoy, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and Kir Bulychev were adapted into films such as *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924) and *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979). Bulychev's work, in particular, proved popular with filmmakers. He adapted his stories himself—for animation by Roman Kachanov, Aleksandr Polushkin, and Vladimir Tarasov. Tarasov's *The Pass* (1988) is an especially remarkable achievement. The culmination of a number of short sci-fi films Tarasov directed in the 1970s-1980s, *The Pass* is a complex, surreal and moving adaptation of Bulychev's story of a small community stranded on a distant planet, struggling to survive.



Vladimir Ilich Tarasov was born in Moscow in 1939 and began working at Soyuzmultfilm as a 16-year-old in 1956. Soyuztmultfilm—a highly successful animation studio founded in Moscow in 1936—was entering a golden age of animation when Tarasov arrived. From the 1950s through the 1980s Soyuzmultfilm was the largest animation studio in Europe and produced films that were globally renowned and awarded. With a surfeit of talent and consistent economic support, masterpieces emerged—such as Lev Atamanov’s *The Snow Queen* (1957) and Yuri Norstein’s *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975)—which continue to influence world animation. Tarasov was able to work at all the stages of animation production, and by 1962 was working closely with talented directors—animating for Vladimir Polkovnikov’s *A Bragging Ant* (1962) and as art director for Vladimir Degtyaryov’s *Snow Maiden* (1969) and others. Unfortunately, not much has been written on him in English. Even in *Animation: A World History* (2017), Giannalberto Bendazzi only spares a few sentences for him, inexplicably dismissing him as having “had doubtful taste in most of his works” (292). That Tarasov had quite interesting and even excellent taste is, however, evident from watching his films. He is also widely considered the master of Soviet sci-fi animation.

Tarasov began directing films in the 1970s, beginning with *Old Photography* (1971), *Happy Birthday* (1972), *Thank You* (1973), and *Cowboys in the City* (1973). It was already clear from his earliest work that his style was modern, convoluted, and innovative, even when the movies were clearly intended as didactic instruction. *Happy Birthday* (1972), featuring a strangely pyromaniacal child, warns against the dangers of fire, rapidly but seamlessly progressing from jokes about guns that are actually lighters to a burnt-out apartment. *Thank You* (1973) shows gratitude for different kinds of work—from flight attendants to conductors, engineers, miners, and metal workers, each work place features its own unique style. Its intriguing look reflects the modernism of 1920s graphic art alongside complex yet minimalist linear scenarios that reflect the thinking of an engineer and at moments recall the visual sound designs of Norman McLaren. *Cowboys in the City* is particularly fun, channeling the UPA style

(abstract backgrounds and expressive caricatures) so appealing to modern sensibilities at the time. It references the live action cinematography of television westerns with a narrator providing important morals as the credits roll (i.e, don't play on the road, children!). Each of its four stories ends badly for the cowboys who can't resist the allure of advertising and urban living—even though they are renowned for being taciturn loners.

This early work clearly marks Tarasov as a collage artist. He draws from different graphic arts traditions and animation styles and integrates them into an overall narrative that utilizes their idiosyncrasies without detracting from the central story. This narrative is often complex and convoluted, which also makes for riveting viewing as the short run times are action-packed. Already in *Mirror of Time* (*Зеркало времени*, 1976), Tarasov's mature style becomes delightfully evident. Fully encompassing the changes—artistic, cultural, political—that typify the late 1960s and early 1970s, this film introduces his interest in interstellar science fiction (as with many of his films, it begins with a view of the cosmos). The film follows a conversation on a spaceship between a boy and a cosmonaut who theorizes that events exist as images mirrored throughout space and time. The boy's large round glasses are a reflective focal point in the film—an image that is central to Soviet film and graphic art, and which returns in *The Pass*. One of the most iconic images of *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dviga Vertov, 1929) is that of an eye superimposed with a camera lens. The glasses in Tarasov's work function as a kind of camera lens as well—projecting thought onto the surface of the eyes. The boy not only sees the stars that they reflect, but understands them. Later, the stories being told and animated—Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and Wells' *Time Machine*—are reflected even more deeply in his irises. This image recalls an avant-garde Soviet movie poster for *The Eleventh* by Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg (a favorite source for Tarasov).

Tarasov begins his powerful collaboration with brilliant art director Nikolay Koshkin on *Mirror of Time*, who would work with him on all his major sci-fi shorts before *The Pass*. Together they created a film bursting

with color, mixing images from east and west, and past and present in a kind of postmodern pastiche, with American westerns and gangster films, medieval knights, comic books, dinosaurs, live battles, beautiful geometrical designs, and very specific animation references, including the Yellow Submarine, Mickey Mouse, and Cheburashka (the ubiquitous furry creature made famous by Tarasov's Soyuzmultfilm colleague Roman Kachanov). Tarasov's next film, *Forward, Time!* (*Внепёд, Время!* 1977) is even more vibrant, chaotic and challenging. Subtitled "An animated fantasy based on the works of Vladimir Mayakovsky" it celebrates his poetry in grand style. The spirit of Mayakovsky—a poet and Futurist who lauded the revolution but often criticized the state—guides the film (in particular his 1915 poem "A Cloud in Trousers") and informs its complex construction. As such the film is an almost surreal and psychedelic take on propaganda as pop art. As Tarasov once explained in an interview, it's like a Russian doll—one can keep opening it to discover new layers of meaning.



The film begins with an uncanny feeling, as the photographic image of a stoic Mayakovsky slowly slides his eyes towards the audience. This eerie movement was used in early animation (like Vertov's *Soviet Toys*, 1924) by layering drawn and cutout animation, and introduces the style of juxtaposition central to the film. The photographic image of Mayakovsky is by Alexander Rodchenko, whose advertising from the 1920s (with texts by Mayakovsky) is also featured. The film's collage aesthetic feels like a cross between John Heartfield's powerfully surreal photomontages and Terry Gilliam's ferocious constructions. Black and white photographic images (sometimes drenched in a bloody red) starkly depict the suffering of the working class and soldiers. In contrast are the excesses of bourgeois culture (including the capitalist west, Russian Empire, and rival Ego-Futurist Igor Severyanin, here skewered as a clownish quail repeating his own poetry: "I'm a genius!"). The film becomes bizarre and utterly unique when a maneki-neko (beckoning cat) spaceship (with references to Escher and anti-Bolshevik propaganda) is revealed to contain one of the film's key characters: a sinuous and ominous gramophone sound horn that has metamorphosized from an ad into an all-consuming mouth. But the Mayakovsky spaceship arrives and destroys the offending capitalist frenzy, ushering in the promising Soviet future—set to the tune of a 1970s rock anthem: "Forward Time!"

Contact (Контакт, 1978) is another film that is bookmarked by the cosmos, and in contrast to *Forward, Time!* it is full of warm fuzzies. Beginning with a series of constellations, it dives down into the countryside, where a painter (resembling Jon Lennon circa 1967 Sgt. Pepper) strolls through a beautiful landscape, looking at butterflies and birds. Oscillating between jazz and Nino Rota's "Theme from *The Godfather*," it focuses on music as the gateway for communication between strangers. Tarasov uses closeups on eyes again as the indicator for thoughts: we see the butterflies and birds imprisoned in the artist's glasses as the inherent need to control others is revealed as the core of human interaction with the world. An alien creature appears from space as the artist relaxes by a pond. In a hilarious sequence, the playful creature tries

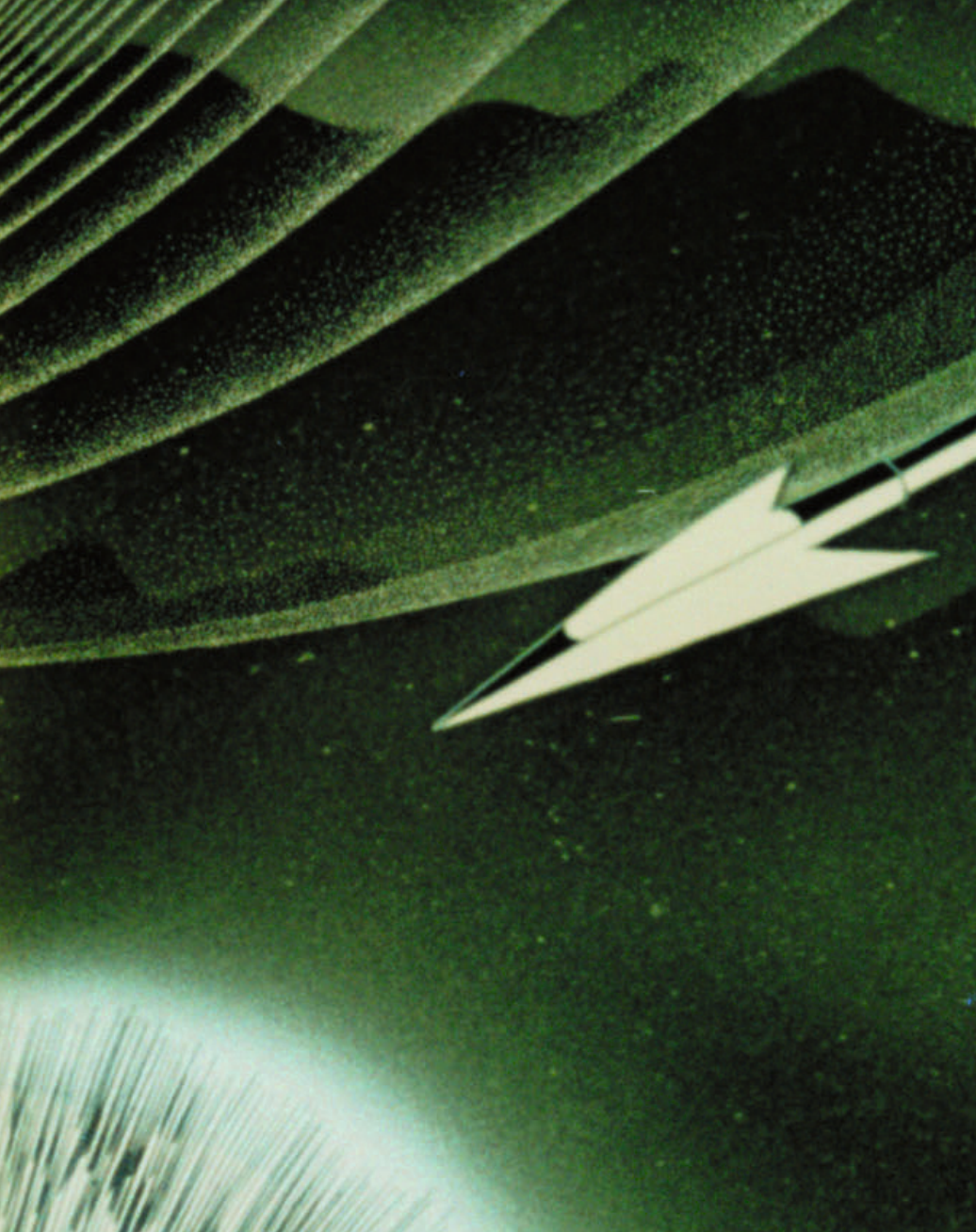
to interact with the terrified artist (whose fearful thoughts are depicted in stark black and white), finally convincing him he's harmless when he transforms into a version of the artist, seeking to sing his song. The film ends with the two singing together as the camera pulls back into the cosmos, opposing Cold War ideology and proposing interstellar harmony.

Shooting Range (*Tup*, 1979), on the other hand, is a dark ironic take on the exploits of capitalism. It is one of several films on which he worked with writer Viktor Slavkin. Set in the frenetic heart of Manhattan, a young man's ancient car breaks down so he looks for a job. He soon finds one, working for an evil capitalist (dressed in hunting gear and a Bavarian feathered hat) who runs a shooting gallery. The film's score—discordant free jazz by the Ganelin Trio—underscores the existential anxiety generated by a capitalist system. Shooting becomes a metaphor for survival as the young man has to choose between starving on the streets or becoming a moving target for the pleasure of others. The exploitation increases when he falls in love and they must both dodge bullets as their life becomes their job. Finally, the owner's depravity looms as he attempts to target their unborn child and they leave (only to be replaced by a new couple). Key to the story is a world of animated fantasy. The man carries a cuckoo clock with him, whose bird is a companion, and lush landscapes and Disney characters are the harbingers of their happiness. This is a trope oft repeated in Tarasov's films and affirms that in a world based on tenuous survival, the inner life of animated dreams is essential.

The Return (*Возвращение*, 1980) resumes Tarasov's interest in sci-fi. The story follows a cosmonaut returning to Earth in a damaged ship. He is instructed by his superiors to sleep deeply before landing the ship manually. This works only too well and no one can wake him until his grandfather invokes his nostalgia for his childhood home. The film's style again contrasts intricate black and white drawings with lush colorful landscapes. The inside of the spaceship is reminiscent of drawings by H.R. Giger, and when the cosmonaut is wired into the spaceship, he is deprived of his human identity. The control center cannot bring him back to reality

because his mind prefers the dreams of his youth—in a setting recalling the opening of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). The small house—with its vibrant flowers and cozy workspace overlooking a peaceful lake—is the home of his soul, and he does not want to leave. The film is filled with snippets of sound and imagery that mimic the strange and chaotic processing of memory in dreams—transforming reality into surreal abstractions and back again. For example, as he awakens, a black dream bat, sparkling with stars, transforms into a rooster crowing at sunrise. The film focuses on the possibilities of communication—the control center engages huge portions of Earth's population in an attempt to wake him, sending messages from boats, stadiums, kites, and even in giant words mown into fields by tractors! The interconnectedness of all walks of life around the globe is emphasized, and the film has a happy ending as the cosmonaut, safely landed, returns to his beloved home.







Tarasov's next two films focus on the importance of art and its relationship with reality. In *Button* (*Пуговица*, 1982), an artist muses in his studio, seeing his art as a place to achieve perfection. He paints himself as a rich man who doesn't have to sew buttons on his shirt. Both he and his girlfriend fall in love with the possibilities of this perfect life, but in the end, they accept the imperfections of a humble life because they have found love with each other, and sewing on buttons is certainly preferable to callously destroying the lives of others. *Anniversary* (*юбилей*, 1983) is a fascinating look at the history of animation at Soyuzmultfilm. It features the projection of clips from classics by Russian animators on a spaceship. *Anniversary* also references Tarasov's work, and a sudden forced landing on a planet reveals a host of aliens who look like the creature from *Contact*. These charming characters usurp the films and in watching them, learn how to be kind. Taking the shape of Cheburashka and other icons of Soviet animation, they populate a planet with the joyful possibilities of animation. Tarasov here reaches out to others as well, as smiling from the crowd is the figure of Suur Tõll (Tyll the Giant) from Estonia's Tallinnfilm (surely a subversive gesture of friendship)!

Contract (*Контракт*, 1985) is an anti-capitalist sci-fi story, based on "Company Store" (1958) by Robert Silverberg, with an anarchic attitude towards ownership. Set on what looks like a desolate landscape, it follows the friendship that develops between a colonizer and a robot who works for an advertising firm. The two bond with each other as both are abused by their greedy bosses. Choosing to help each other survive rather than follow orders, they watch as their companies battle each other and are destroyed. The style unabashedly incorporates old and new popular culture—from 1920s avant-garde art (the villain strongly resembles Anatoly Belsky's poster for *Five Minutes*) to a matter transmitter that looks like a Rubik's Cube. The film ends with their laughter as the camera pulls out to reveal them standing on a giant flower arrangement floating in space. Add to that the use of "I Can't Give You Anything but Love" (1957), sung by Ella Fitzgerald and played from the robot's tape deck, and you have a film that pits love against economic exploitation and merrily lets love win.

Tarasov's *The Pass* (*Перевал*, 1988) is a culmination of these earlier works—both in terms of substance and style. The film is a riveting and beautiful exploration of what it means to live in a hostile world with little connection to a cherished past. Kir Bulychev wrote the screenplay, adapted from the first chapter of his novel *The Settlement* (1988)—also known as *Those Who Survive*—which Tarasov read as a story called “The Pass” in the magazine *Knowledge is Power* in 1980. The cinematographer, Kabul Rasulov, and editor, Margarita Mikheeva, had worked with Tarasov on most of his previous films, though his usual art director was absent. Instead, Tarasov drew widely from eerie illustrations by Anatoly Fomenko, a mathematician and artist who focused on illustrating topological objects—many of them referencing Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967).

The story of *The Pass* is simple: the spaceship Polus must suddenly land on an uninhabited planet when its reactor explodes. The ship lodges in a desolate mountain pass and the high radiation levels force the crew to abandon it. In searching for a place to settle, almost half of them die, but the forty survivors build a new life in a forest. The action of the film begins sixteen years after the crash, with only a third of the original survivors remaining (twelve adults with thirteen children born to them). The group still struggles to survive as they are attacked by animals and racked by disease and malnutrition. Oleg is the young protagonist, who was a baby when the ship crashed. He and a small group set out to search for supplies on the ship and during their journey they find the remains of the failed expeditions before them. Only three of them reach the ship, where they do find supplies, and start back to the others, hoping that they may one day be able to understand how the ship works so that they can contact the outside world.

The tone of the film is melancholic and surreal, reflecting heavily on a home and way of life that is unattainable, and perhaps no longer exists. The film's music, composed by Alexander Gradskii, confirms this melancholic tone, as does the narration by Aleksandr Kaidanovsky

(perhaps best known for his role in *Stalker*, and who was the narrator for *Forward, Time!*). The lost home is a theme that runs throughout Tarasov's work—the need for simple human warmth and familiar objects in the midst of a terrifying, if often beautiful, frozen world. The loss of traditional cultures in the Soviet period might be a specific allusion, yet there is also a larger sense of the loss that all encounter as the forward march of time irrevocably changes the landscape of reality, and familiar and beloved experiences, objects, and people cease to exist. This sense of loss exists side-by-side, however, with the theory (first seen in *Mirror of Time*) that these things continue to exist as images somewhere in the cosmos. Thus, even though the sense of loss is most pronounced in *The Return* and *The Pass*, there is still a deeply ingrained hope that images from the past can be discovered, embraced, and cherished.

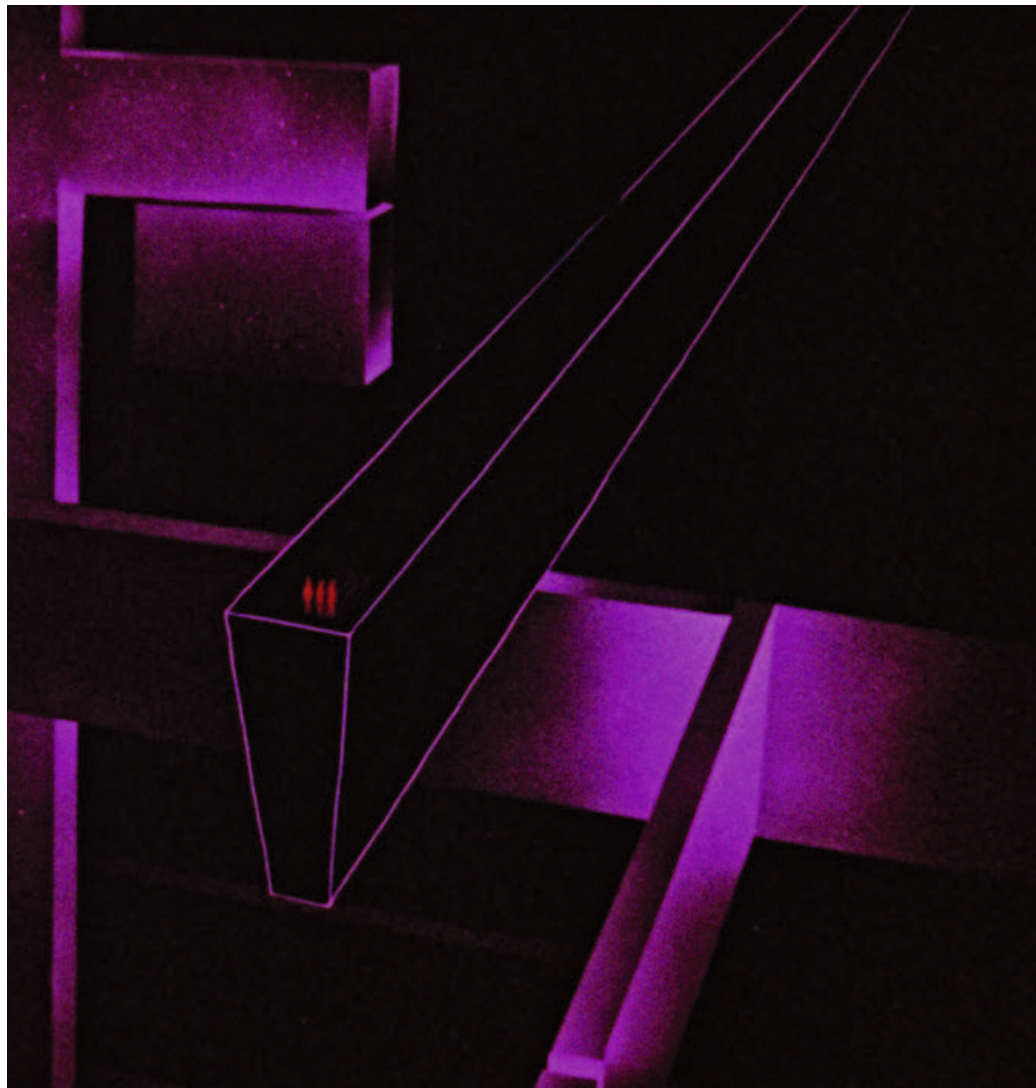
This idea is referenced already at the beginning of the film—as a personal loss, when Oleg looks at a photograph of his parents, who are dead, and as a cultural lack, when a child recites a story but does not know what he's describing (“what is a ‘horse’?”). This is framed by an image of Oleg in profile, his eye whirling with memory as he writes the name of the film above him. “The Pass” is the location of the ship, of the past, of a culture that has been ripped away from the survivors, and finally, of a possible future and a return home, to Earth. As such, their memories provide an essential nourishment for the survivors. In the sixteen years since Tarasov began directing films (echoed in the sixteen years the crew fights to survive in the woods), such memories and images are woven through his films. Home is pictured in the abundant flora, the cheerful creatures, and objects that speak to art (paintings, photos), intellect (lenses and books), and achievement (spaceships). In *The Pass*, food seems to focus the collective longing: people risk their lives to harvest mushrooms, condensed milk becomes the stuff of poetry (lovingly detailed over and over again), and one elder responds to the practical advice—“a slice of bread today is more important than abstract pineapples”—with the plaintive sigh: *But do you remember the taste?*



Oleg's existential meditation is suddenly interrupted by chaotic drumming and a surprise attack by a group of animals (looking like vibrating spheres with large teeth). War for the survivors is always imminent. The group defeats the animals and returns to contemplating the future—either they return to the ship and forge a future, or they abandon the course of human progress. So, they send out Thomas, an elder, with three youth: Oleg, Dick, and Mariana. Thomas dies, however, saving Oleg from falling off a cliff, and when the three teenagers bury him, they are reflected in his glasses—a culminating trope. It is as if the boy in *Mirror of Time*, who became a young man in *Contact*, is now a middle-aged man sacrificing himself for the new generation. “Three microscopic figures in a tremendous, empty and burdened world,” remain. They must make their way forward, and they do reach the ship, where they find food, weapons, and most importantly, books that can teach them how to work the ship. Such a message of success in spite all the years of hardship certainly has relevance to the events of the late 1980s, with *glasnost*, *Perestroika*, and the eventual dismantling of the Soviet Union. While the film is certainly not overtly political, its focus on reconnecting with a larger human world that has been lost is clear.

While the human characters are drawn in Tarasov's familiar avant-garde graphic style, the world they must traverse is surreal, and Fomenko's illustrations suggest an allegorical environment (including the black cat Behemoth) that is as astonishing as it is hostile. The song heard as they journey is based on the poetry of Sasha Chorny, a contemporary of Mayakovsky, and the words underscore the despair, gloom, and alienation of the images. It is a world leached of color—which does not appear until they board the ship, entering a portal, a lens just like the one in *Mirror of Time*: the past has remained frozen in time for them to discover, in living color. Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor* plays as they move into a space dissected by lines, quadrants, and geometrical shapes: the topography of the past, which is a huge and empty space traversed by circles, planes, and buried within that, knowledge. This hidden depth is made clear when Mariana cuts into a round object on their journey, unleashing a

transformation that produces a giant book. That this space is basically a giant computer layers virtual with analog technology in a way that is distinctly 1980s.



Oleg finds the detritus of past culture on the ship and gravitates to significant objects: a chessboard, a Russian doll, a baby's rattle and bottle of milk, verdant flowers that crumble as he touches them. The numbers of the cabins reflect back from his eyes as he thinks: "This is my home. I've been here before." The narrator states, "In ordinary life, you cannot run into yourself" but Oleg has the opportunity to see his past perfectly preserved, and it shows the way forward. It is not an ideal future—he points at it with a gun, but he also possesses books of knowledge with which to create human connection. And although they do not yet know how to respond to the cacophony of noises they hear from Earth, they seem to have managed to connect with a local. As in *Contact*, *Anniversary*, and *Contract*, the importance of loving creatures is emphasized in the film. Mariana befriends a "goat" who first protects them and then eats their food and wanders off—to give birth, as we later find out. The term "goat" is merely euphemistic as the creature actually looks a lot like Mr. Snuffleupagus from *Sesame Street*—a kind of shy mammoth but with an exoskeleton and a lot of sad eyes. The film ends by observing that the "goat" wants more condensed milk, though it doesn't know what it is—pointing to their joint desire for and confusion about the future.

The future is always a question mark, of course, and *The Pass* is tentatively optimistic about it. When Thomas says "Onward, friends. Onward" with a raised arm pointing towards the horizon, it calls to mind the confidence of *Forward, Time!* It even looks as if he is facing us, the film audience, when he declares: "I feel almost sure that we will make it." There is hope, then, Tarasov suggests. Though the restructuring of Soyuzmultfilm in the post-Soviet period changed production radically, Tarasov continued to direct films into the early 1990s. He developed a short series about dolphin spies called *Happy Start* (1989-91), and directed two episodes of the highly popular series *I'll Get You!* (*Hy, nozodu!*) in 1993, which featured the classic animation antagonism between predator and prey (wolf and rabbit). Tarasov also taught animation for a decade in India and Iran, inspiring new generations to appreciate how animation functions as a universal language—one that sparks into life from the soul of the artist. Despite

plans for further projects, *The Pass* became his swan song—and a brilliant one at that. Best of all, the future contains his films, which is fortunate for us all.

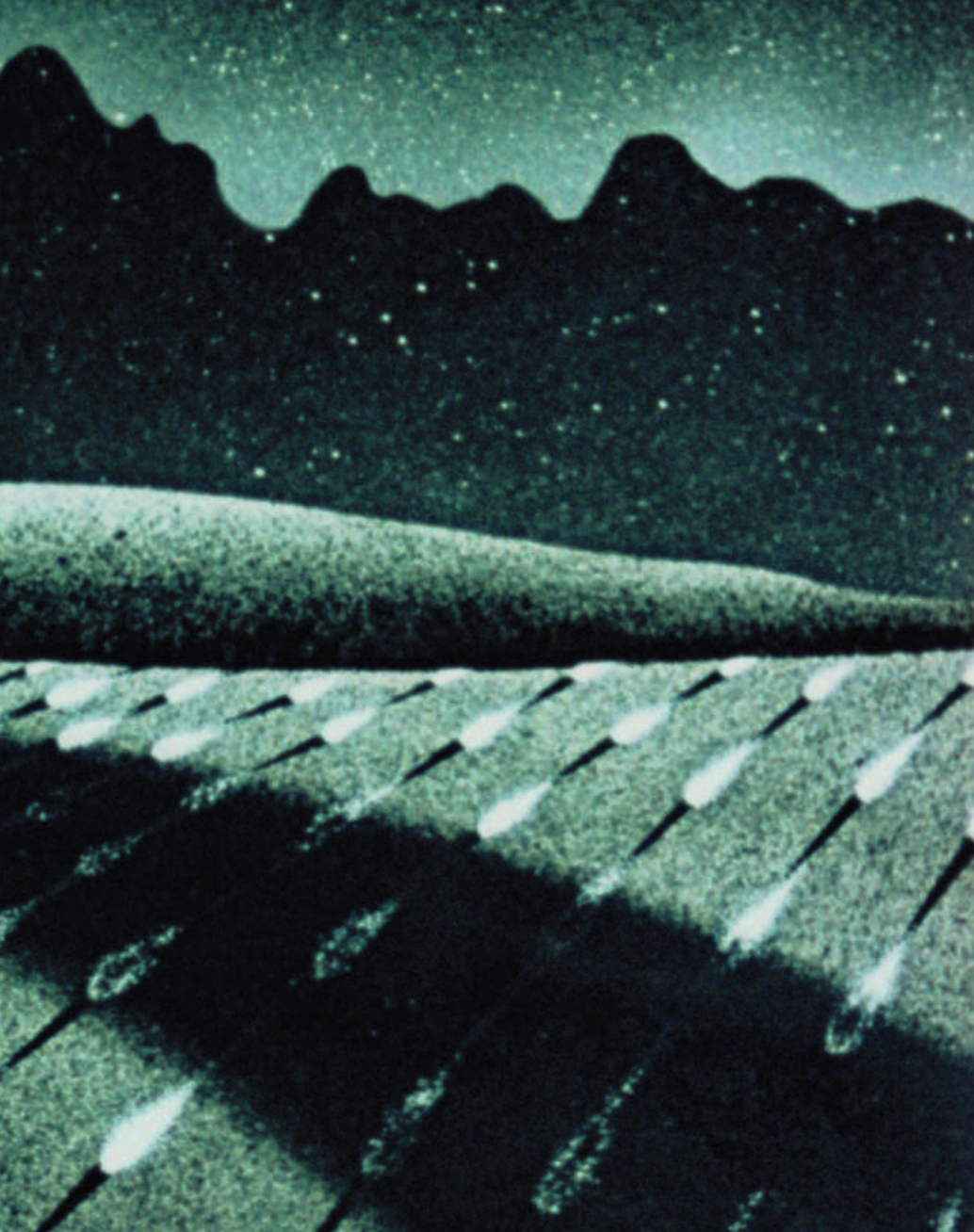
Jennifer Lynde Barker is a Professor of film studies at Bellarmine University, where she directs the Film Studies minor and specializes in animation and film history and aesthetics. Author of *The Aesthetics of Antifascist Film: Radical Projection*, she has published numerous articles and film reviews in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *MUBI Notebook*, *Filmihullu*, and *Cinema Scope*, among others, and curates animation programs at the Midnight Sun Film Festival. She is currently writing a book on early 20th-century animation.

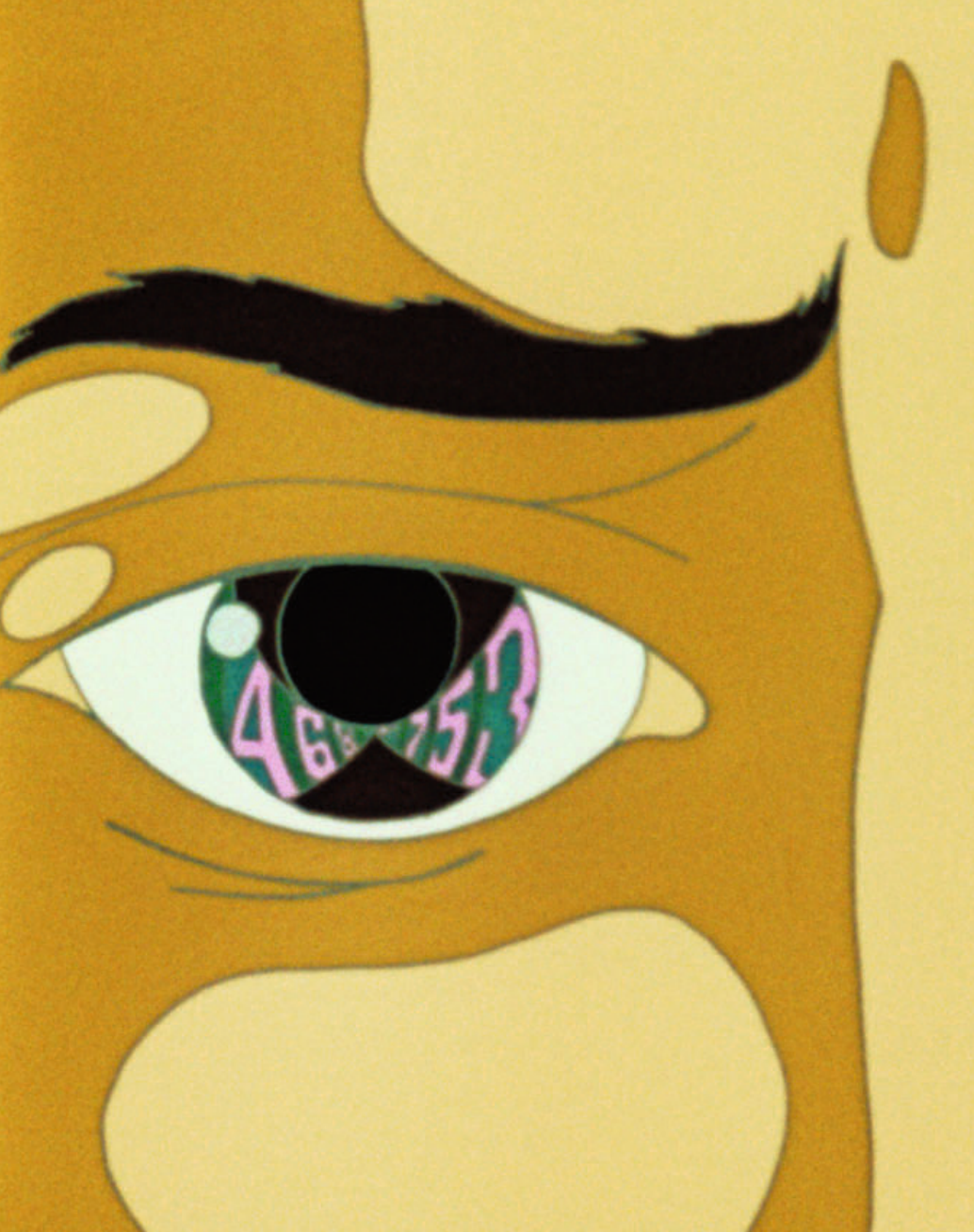


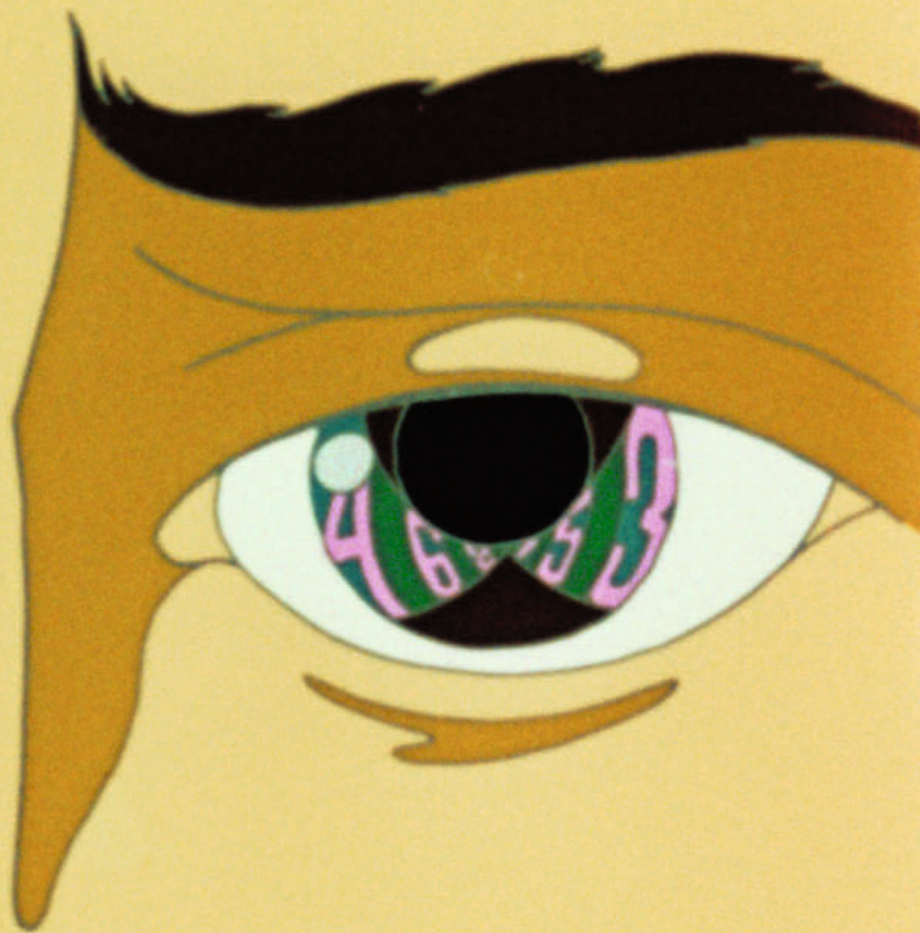
































Notes on the Restoration

THE PASS, THE MYSTERY OF THE THIRD PLANET and
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Soyuzmultfilm.

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